

September 1, 2005

The Honorable Arlen Specter
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Specter:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I urge you to oppose funding for the research and development of the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP) and other advanced nuclear weapons during the Senate Appropriations Committee's consideration of the Fiscal Year 2006 Defense Appropriations bill.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops opposes this funding because it would reinforce policies and practices that envision a much wider role for nuclear weapons, including their first use and their use against non-nuclear threats. These weapons would unnecessarily blur the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons and would erode the fragile barrier against their use.

Just war moral criteria require that the use of force be proportionate and discriminate, minimizing harm to civilians. We remain unconvinced that the more usable nuclear weapons envisioned would be proportionate or discriminate in any meaningful sense. A recent report on the "Effects of Nuclear Earth Penetrator and Other Weapons" by the National Research Council found that the RNEP has the potential to spread dangerously high levels of radiation above ground, and thus, poses a grave threat to human lives. The report concluded that "the weapons cannot penetrate to depths required for total containment" and would result in "casualties" that range from "hundreds" to "more than a million" people.

Our nation and other nuclear powers have new opportunities to reduce and ultimately end their reliance on nuclear weapons. Even after the Moscow Treaty is fully implemented, the United States would have a nuclear arsenal that far exceeds anything necessary to deter existing or foreseeable nuclear threats. The moral task today is to proceed with deeper cuts and ultimately to ban nuclear weapons entirely, not to begin research on new ones.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is a serious problem, but research on new, more usable nuclear weapons will only undermine the credibility of U.S. efforts to address it effectively. Mutual restraint, international cooperation, and leadership by example are called for, not the proliferation of our own weapons of mass destruction.

Finally, funding for research on new nuclear weapons and provisions that would enable more rapid resumption of nuclear testing would move the United States further from the urgent task of ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban, an essential step in stopping nuclear proliferation and moving toward progressive nuclear disarmament.

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In light of the adverse impact such funding would have on our international nonproliferation efforts, and especially, the devastating toll these weapons could have on human lives, I urge you to oppose appropriations funding for the RNEP program and for any program to study or develop new types of nuclear weapons.

Thank you for your kind consideration of our views.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John H. Ricard S.S.J.", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Most Reverend John H. Ricard, S.S.J.
Bishop of Pensacola-Tallahassee
Chairman, Committee on International Policy